

Balloon Federation of America

Nomination for Montgolfier Diploma

Contribution to the Sport of Ballooning

In 1962 Deke Sonnichsen was the president of the Parachute Club of America when he met Don Picard who introduced him to the sport of hot air ballooning. Deke became a balloon pilot in 1965 and began promoting hot air ballooning as vigorously as he had promoted parachuting.

Don Picard said Deke Sonnichsen “became a missionary with a gospel of sport ballooning.” In 1964, he organized the Northern California Balloon Society and established the longest continual hot air balloon event in the United States, the WHAMOBASS Balloon Invitational. He was one of the major organizers of the National Sport Balloon Society.

At the encouragement of the National Aeronautic Association Deke worked with Peter Pelligrino who represented the Balloon Club in America to establish the Balloon Federation of America. The unified organization was incorporated in 1967 to promote the sport of ballooning, which included hot air and gas. The new organization needed operating funds that Deke provided by offering the life memberships from the Sport Balloon Society.

Deke promoted the sport of ballooning through his personal flying adventures and public relations. In his early flying experiences, he made several record attempts and set the first AX-4 altitude record in a Picard balloon. As an employee with Lockheed Aviation, he convinced them to experiment with and certify titanium propane tanks for hot air balloons, a patent the Company stills holds. Working with engineering students from Stanford University, Deke helped them create a “round” aluminum basket as part of a contest conducted by Alcoa Aluminum Company to create unique items from aluminum in 1968. The basket was flown under an AX-3 balloon and became the cover story in Design Engineering in 1969. During the 1970’s Deke began promoting hot air ballooning through appearances at air shows in Watsonville and Salinas, CA. He organized public events for De Anza College, Stanford University, and the University of California at Berkley.

Although promoting the sport was important, Deke was vitally concerned about ballooning safety. He became an early Federal Aviation Administration Volunteer Safety Counselor for balloons in 1975 and a Designated Flight Examiner for hot air balloons in 1979. Deke was an early proponent of the BFA safety programs and took an active role as an instructor and organizer since 1985. He frequently addresses the National Transportation Safety Board accident investigation and review process.

In more than 40 years, Deke has trained over 300 pilots how to fly hot air balloons. He has logged more than 5,000 hours of personal flying time and held early altitude records in a hot air balloon. He has conducted research and promoted the development of new and innovative technologies in aviation safety.